

## Legislative Politics as Normal? Voting Behaviour and Beyond in the European Parliament

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## **Forum Section**

# **Legislative Politics as Normal?**

## **Voting Behaviour and Beyond in the European Parliament**



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The publication of *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament* (Hix et al., 2007) presents a welcome opportunity to reflect on the significant advances that have been made in recent years in the study of legislative organization in the EP. It allows us to examine the present state of this field and to identify some areas that remain under-researched and even neglected in current research agendas. In and of itself, any study that so forcefully and convincingly confronts the conventional wisdom that the European Parliament (EP) is an ineffectual, irrelevant institution deserves a wide readership. However, this book represents much more than simply a study of legislative behaviour in the only directly elected European Union (EU) institution. It addresses much larger questions about the origins of political parties and party discipline, the nature of party competition and the potential for representative democracy in a complex political environment. This book will be of interest not just to those immersed in the political system of the EP but also to party scholars and legislative watchers more generally and indeed even to democratic theorists concerned about the possibility for representative democracy in the EU.

The field of legislative politics has long been dominated by studies of the United States Congress. This congressional research has generated a remarkable body of scholarship, which has remained largely untested beyond the congressional experience for too long. In the past decade however, there has been a conscious and concerted effort on the part of EP scholars, led in no

small part by the authors of this book, to extend these theories into a comparative context. This book represents a very deliberate effort to connect legislative studies of the European Parliament to this wider body of literature and to shake off the mantle of the '*sui generis*' approach that has frequently and regrettably governed EU studies.

The overarching argument running through this book is that political groups in the European Parliament have become fully institutionalized; they dominate decision-making and are very similar animals to their national counterparts. The bulk of the book is dedicated to demonstrating that the political groups have become increasingly cohesive over time and that politics in the Parliament has been 'normalized', in that party competition is along ideological rather than territorial dimensions. An impressive amount of data, both quantitative and qualitative, is marshalled to convincingly demonstrate the validity of these arguments, and the book's contribution to legislative studies and EU politics is indisputable. The book combines theoretical rigour with equally rigorous and systematic testing of the main hypotheses and it greatly enriches and advances our understanding of the political dynamics that operate within the European Parliament.

The first three chapters of the book present the theoretical framework for the analysis that follows. Chapter three in particular deserves close reading; it is here that the main theoretical argument is developed. The authors theorize that, contrary to conventional wisdom, we should not expect to observe territorial politics in action in the European Parliament. They hypothesize that territorial conflicts are devolved to lower levels of decision-making within a federal structure where they can be resolved most efficiently. However, certain conflicts (particularly economic ones) generate inefficiencies if resolved at the territorial level and that power in these policy areas is best retained at the federal level. The theory thus predicts that party competition should be along ideological dimensions within federal chambers and the remainder of the book is concerned with finding confirmatory evidence to this effect. Chapters four and five present empirical evidence that participation rates in voting have increased over time and that cohesion has risen concomitantly with the increasing powers of the Parliament itself. Chapter six examines whether or not political group control of the agenda is sufficient to enforce party discipline. Chapter seven considers the tension that may come to bear on members of the European Parliament (MEPs) when there is a conflict of interests between their national party and their EP political group. Chapters eight and nine examine the ideological structure of political competition in the EP, with the former focusing on coalition formation and the latter on the dimensionality of the policy space that is evident in voting behaviour. The final two chapters provide detailed and rich case studies of recent controversial and

high-stake votes, the 'sacking' of the Santer Commission and the takeover directive, to complement the analysis in chapters four to nine. One could dwell in detail on the many merits of this fine book, but the achievements of the authors will be obvious to any reader and summarizing them thus seems redundant. Therefore it is more productive to explore in the remainder of this forum piece some of the analytical issues this book raises and the questions and challenges it poses for legislative scholars and students of the EP in particular.

### **Roll call votes**

The study of legislative behaviour in Congress has relied heavily on the analyses of roll call votes (RCVs) and the influence of this body of scholarship is evident throughout this book. It is not too radical to claim that the study of legislative behaviour has been transformed in the past two decades by these analytical techniques. Legislative voting records clearly provide very important information about legislative behaviour, voting cohesiveness and perhaps, though more controversially, ideological preferences. *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament* represents the culmination of an ambitious and formidable data-collection exercise in this tradition. By collecting all roll call votes in the European Parliament since 1979 the authors have made an extremely valuable contribution to legislative and EU studies. Already the data set is being widely used by scholars around the world to various ends. Our understanding of legislative behaviour in the EP has been and will continue to be greatly enhanced by the application to this setting of the technical tools developed for Congress. But roll call votes also have limitations and future scholars who make use of this rich data set must be aware of, acknowledge and correct for the problems associated with their use.

Unlike the US experience, not all votes in the EP are by roll call and this generates significant questions about the representative characteristics of the samples we observe. Currently roll calls number around one-third of all votes, and we still know too little about the process by which roll calls are generated to conclude that this is a random sample from the universe of all votes. Roll calls in the EP may be corrupted by strategic considerations, which will affect the inferences we can draw from them. Indeed, even where all votes are recorded by roll call, the range of vote choices and therefore outcomes will be limited by the influence of pre-floor stages of legislative preparation as well as by decisions regarding the floor agenda (Lawrence et al., 2006). Thus, even where members have permission to vote according to their conscience during plenary sessions, parties (particularly those with a

majority) may constrain members' voting behaviour by controlling the legislative agenda. This issue aside, the more pressing and challenging difficulty with the use of RCVs in the EP is that the majority of votes go unrecorded.

Hix et al. (2007: 30) hold that it is not unreasonable to assume that roll call votes are requested on the most important issues in the EP. But preliminary research (Carrubba et al., 2006) on votes in the fifth Parliament (1999–2004) suggest that roll calls are disproportionately called on resolutions rather than under the co-decision procedure. Thus, legislatively consequential votes are under-sampled, which may run counter to the argument that roll calls are called on the most important votes. If the assumption of importance is weakened, does this affect the inferences we draw? How might this over-representation of votes on non-legislative issues affect our confidence in cohesion indices or NOMINATE scores? With regard to cohesion, the direction of bias introduced by the over-sampling of non-legislative votes is not by any means obvious. On the one hand, this underrepresentation of legislative votes in the roll call sample may bias the levels of cohesion downwards. If most roll call votes are of little legislative consequence, do political groups bother expending limited resources on whipping party members into line? On the other hand, as the authors demonstrate in chapter four, attendance at roll call votes goes up with the legislative importance of the vote. Is it the case that only the most loyal, career-minded MEPs turn up for votes on resolutions? This may have the effect of inflating the actual levels of cohesion of political groups in the EP, if such votes are over-sampled. Yet another possibility is that the lower turnout on resolutions reflects the fact that only those truly interested turn up, and that the subset of votes thus reflects the interests of preference outliers. We do not know the answers to such questions; it may very well be that attendance rates or legislative significance are not related systematically to levels of cohesion. The countervailing dynamics that potentially exist here suggest some interesting questions that future analysts mining this data set will need to consider.

The authors further document that the number of roll calls has increased dramatically over time, which may in part diminish the importance of the above questions; as the number of votes increases, their representative nature is likely to improve. But do these varying levels of roll calls give rise to additional concerns about cross-parliamentary comparisons? There were fewer than 900 roll calls in the first Parliament (1979–84), compared with over 5000 in the fifth (1999–2004). Can we have the same confidence in the results drawn from the much smaller samples in the early Parliaments as we do in those from the fourth and fifth Parliaments?

A more general shortcoming of the NOMINATE procedure is that it does not typically provide uncertainty estimates (such as standard errors and

confidence intervals). This may lead to a false sense of precision for those who use the scores.<sup>1</sup> A particular problem that does not seem to be of concern in the congressional literature but may be more relevant in the European Parliament context is the large variation in member participation rates in roll calls. In a given Parliament, some MEPs vote thousands of times whereas others vote a mere handful of times. This reflects high absentee rates, comparatively large turnover rates in membership between elections and, more worryingly perhaps, strategic absences (not to be confused with official abstentions). For instance, in the current Parliament many of the new members from East European countries have particularly poor voting records. We can obtain NOMINATE scores with as few as 20 votes, but it is problematic if one MEP's scores are calculated with 1600 votes and the scores of another with only 40 when no uncertainty estimates are generated.

To interpret the scores that are generated by NOMINATE as preference measures is common practice in congressional work, primarily because it is one measure of something unobservable that lies at the heart of much of what we, as political scientists, are interested in. The authors of this book largely, and judiciously, shy away from this particular interpretation in the context of the EP, though the data they have generated may unwisely be utilized to this end by others. The argument sustained throughout this book very much indicates that these are not party-free measures of preferences and should not be used as proxies for ideology. Nevertheless, preferences need to be approximated if we are to test theories of legislative decision-making or address questions about whether or not key parliamentary bodies such as committees are representative agents of their principal (Parliament). Alternative measures such as elite surveys suffer from serious sample response issues, and even this aside there is no actual obligation on those who respond to be truthful. Measures based on constituency characteristics, which have proved popular in the USA, are also problematic given the very vague notion of constituency in the EP. One final possibility is to make use of the recent interest group ratings from organizations such as Friends of the Earth, though again these suffer from small sample size issues and may exaggerate extremism and bipolarity (Snyder, 1992). There is clearly no silver bullet solution to the preference measurement problem that legislative scholars confront, but cross-validation of the various measures is recommended.

Similarly, testing spatial models of legislative behaviour fundamentally depends on our ability to accurately gauge the number and nature of the political dimensions on which parties compete. The authors' analysis of roll call voting in chapter nine demonstrates that there are broadly two dimensions on which the political groups compete and that these dimensions have been relatively stable over time. The first dimension fairly conclusively maps a general left-right policy dimension, which lends weight to the overall

argument that party competition is defined ideologically rather than territorially. But the second dimension, the authors readily admit, is more difficult to interpret substantively. It may represent some European-level government-opposition dynamics and/or a pro-EU integration versus anti-EU integration dimension. The interpretation of dimensions relies primarily on a researcher's substantive knowledge but may be complicated in the case of the EP if selection biases are evident in roll call votes. Again the question of the representativeness of roll calls is fundamental here. If RCVs are not representative by issue area, this may affect the conclusions we draw about the nature of the policy space. If roll calls are called disproportionately in certain policy domains, this may lead to the overemphasis of particular dimensions of conflict in NOMINATE-type analysis.

Carrubba et al. (2006) suggest that a degree of caution is required in the interpretation of and generalization from roll calls in the European Parliament. Overall, their work finds evidence for pooling concerns, the asymmetric use of roll calls under different legislative procedures and the calling of RCVs disproportionately by particular political groups (notably the Greens) and in particular issue areas. More work on disaggregated votes may lead to interesting findings; pooling RCVs on co-decisions with those on resolutions may not be ideal without first knowing for certain that they are generated by the same processes and whether they experience the same degree of whipping. None of this is to argue that the use of roll calls should be abandoned but rather their use necessitates explicit consideration of the process by which roll calls are produced. In addition, disaggregating votes by issue area might prove a fruitful exercise: for instance, does the subsample of votes on environmental issues lead to a clear green policy dimension emerging? More work on comparing the sample of roll calls to the universe of actual (and indeed potential) votes would greatly enhance our confidence in the inferences we draw. Overall these issues suggest that the analysis of roll call votes has much potential. There is clearly scope for further development of roll call analyses through the use of more sophisticated techniques such as Monte Carlo Markov Chain (MCMC) modelling, which also generates uncertainty estimates. In conclusion, the contribution of Hix et al. (2007) via the data set, which accompanies the book, cannot be overestimated.

## **Moving beyond the floor**

Despite the particular issues that arise with the use of RCVs in the EP, it is convincingly demonstrated over the course of this book that the political groups in the European Parliament have become increasingly cohesive over

time. A crucial question that the work thus motivates is how such unity is created. Political parties in established democracies typically exhibit such high levels of cohesion that the question of how such discipline has arisen has, until recently, received little attention (Bowler et al., 1999). In emerging legislatures, however, the process of transforming rudimentary party organizations into disciplined parties is not inevitable. What mechanisms are used to achieve this end? How party discipline arises and how it is maintained are central questions of interest in legislative studies. Our knowledge of these topics, however, suffers from substantial gaps, especially with regard to the practice of party discipline outside the relatively familiar Anglo-American setting.

If we are fully to disentangle the concepts of ideological affinity and party discipline, we need to look beyond the voting behaviour of MEPs. A party that is cohesive because of an affinity of ideological viewpoints and a party that is cohesive because its members are whipped into line are observationally equivalent when one restricts one's analysis solely to floor voting. Krehbiel (1993) has put the argument for affinity mostly forcefully, arguing that parties merely reflect their members' preferences; they provide neither structure nor constraint. He posits that legislative outcomes (via voting) are not the product of parliamentary party discipline but rather reflect the distribution of preferences of the party's members.

The challenge of creating cohesive political parties is not trivial in the European Parliament. The literature on party discipline tends to focus on electoral incentives as a means of inducing party loyalty, but the European Parliament provides a particularly interesting case study because these inducements are very weak, if not entirely missing. To the extent that electoral incentives shape much of the behaviour of political actors, the political groups in the European Parliament are clearly greatly disadvantaged when compared with their national counterparts. They do not control access to the electoral ballot, they do not have resources to finance election campaigns and, additionally, MEPs need not fear that rebellious behaviour will force early elections. Although the prospects for cohesion appear quite bleak, the book by Hix et al. (2007) demonstrates quite persuasively that this has not been the experience of the political groups in the EP. Given the highly constrained environment in which the political groups operate, how can we account for the rise in political group cohesion? The findings of this book motivate many questions that perhaps can be answered only by closer examination of the activities of MEPs both within their political groups and within the committee system.

A system of credible sanctions and rewards is one means of resolving the collective dilemmas that all parties face. Do these sanctions and rewards exist



internally to the EP and are they systematically used to punish and reward party defectors and loyalists? It is almost certainly the case that intra-parliamentary incentives to encourage cohesion operate in all legislative bodies, but often these are overshadowed by electoral considerations. The study of party discipline in the European Parliament allows legislative scholars more neatly to isolate the internal and electoral factors in an actor's motivation structure, with implications for the general study of legislative behaviour. The European Parliament offers scholars a particularly good case study for demonstrating the importance of internal advancement in a political actor's motivations, because it is one of the few contexts in which the electoral connection is not clearly dominant. One obvious avenue of research is to examine whether or not those who vote against the party are sanctioned via the loss of valuable offices within the Parliament or the political group structure. Does the committee system, for instance, provide the political groups with an important source of patronage, in addition to acting as a source of policy expertise? As is the case with the US Congress, and increasingly with a wide variety of legislatures across the world, committees are the lifeblood of the European Parliament. The political groups have played a crucial and very deliberate role in the organization of parliamentary committees from the outset. In particular, the committee assignment process is controlled by political groups rather than through a seniority-type norm as in the US Congress. In addition, there is a clear hierarchy of committees, with committee prestige largely determined by the degree of legislative powers the EP has in a given policy jurisdiction. Positions on these high-status committees are very much sought after by ambitious MEPs. This hierarchy of prestige and control of the assignment process grants the party leaders some power vis-à-vis individual MEPs. Not only has the committee system expanded to provide 'jobs for the boys', but control over the committee assignment process and committee chairs has been strongly tightened over the years. In general, the career trajectories of MEPs and how these relate to their behaviour on the floor (if at all) offers some wonderful research opportunities for future legislative scholars. How do MEPs' career expectations influence their legislative behaviour and, in turn, how does this behaviour impact on their future career trajectories?

On a related note, the question of who controls the MEPs – national parties or political groups – is addressed in chapter seven. The evidence here suggests that members vote with their political group most of the time, but there is also evidence of voting against the political group in favour of a member's national delegation when the two do not coincide. On a minor statistical note, it is worth considering that in any group versus subgroup comparison one is 'virtually guaranteed to find that subgroups are more

cohesive than groups' (Desposato, 2003: 281), especially when subgroups are small, as is the case with many national delegations. The overall result that national parties are MEPs' principal is a little disquieting because it suggests that political groups are not as fully institutionalized or as powerful as cohesion scores taken at face value might indicate. Interesting questions arise about the nature of the relationship between national parties and their parent political groups. Is the political group more than the sum of its national parties? Are some national parties more privileged than others in the political group structure, perhaps as a function of size? Can fully institutionalized national political parties be conceived of as similar to factions within the supranational political group? One obvious question that needs to be addressed further is whether or not national delegations are given exemptions by their political group on certain votes. This may occur for instance when matters of national importance are at stake and/or the national party's vote does not affect the overall success or failure of the ballot. Overall, the results in this chapter motivate some fascinating questions about what happens when there is incongruence between the policy positions of national delegations and those of the political group.

## **Agenda control**

Chapter six of the book examines the impact of agenda-setting powers on cohesion levels but finds little evidence to support this hypothesis. The authors conclude that 'parties in the European Parliament have only a limited opportunity to use their agenda setting powers to control the voting behaviour of their backbench members' (Hix et al., 2007: 130). Part of the problem with this type of proposition and analysis is the great difficulty of capturing and measuring the concept of agenda control in cross-sectional statistical models. Given the proportional norms that govern procedural matters inside the EP, the effect of agenda-setting powers will be conditional on party size, though clearly the two issues are conceptually distinct. The results in chapter six are on the whole weak, the explained variance of the models, despite the inclusion of upwards of 20 variables, ranges between 1% and 4%. These models are clearly not explaining a great deal, even though some individual coefficients are significant. The question arises of whether or not the measures utilized are really capturing agenda-setting powers. Do we reject the hypothesis that agenda-setting powers are not very important in explaining cohesion levels in the EP, or do we accept the ancillary hypothesis that the measures for such complex concepts as agenda-setting are imprecise? Measurement is the challenge for future scholars, and perhaps a complementary approach that examines the

historical struggles over agenda-setting powers within the Parliament would be worth pursuing. In addition, recent work by Schneider et al. (2006) highlights the need for better models of EU decision-making in general, particularly models that incorporate the consensual norms that are the hallmark of EU politics.

Empirical research into battles over the organization of the Parliament and the evolution of the rules of procedure has been surprisingly limited and mostly anecdotal to date. Apart from work by Williams (1995) and Kreppel (2002), there is little critical analysis of the internal evolution of the Parliament.<sup>2</sup> In the period 1979–2007 considerably more than 1000 rule changes were proposed by the various Rules Committees. The volume of procedural proposals is noteworthy; a great deal of parliamentary time has been dedicated to structuring the institution. The formal rules of the legislative game inside the European Parliament have been highly contested over the course of the past 30 years, which would indicate that agenda-setting powers are not perceived as irrelevant by the main actors. Procedural matters may not be of pressing concern in legislatures that possess a large and disciplined majority (Binder, 1997), but where such conditions are absent, as in the EP, legislative rules become important tools for actors who wish to build and sustain stable and cohesive parties. The history of the European Parliament is marked by lengthy battles over what appear to be organizational minutiae. The amount of effort and parliamentary time devoted to changing rules does not accord with a non-partisan account of procedural choice. As Willi Rothley commented in plenary in 1993, '[t]he Rules of Procedure are Parliament's Constitution. Matters affecting the Rules of Procedure are therefore always political matters' (14 March 1993). In addition, the timing of many changes does not accord with changes in the external environment. The debates in Parliament reveal that the two largest parties – the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of the European Socialists (PES) – have frequently acted in concert to shape the rules to their collective benefit.

Interpreting rule change and rule evolution can be a difficult and subjective exercise because rule changes are open to multiple interpretations. What type of evidence would be convincing corroboration of purposive and intentional action on the part of the political groups in the EP to promote cohesion? Is a rule that limits the speaking rights of individual members simply an attempt to use a limited parliamentary schedule more efficiently, or does it signal an attempt to reduce the rights of individual parliamentarians? Most rule changes will appear technical and of minor consequence even if intended for some more partisan purpose; it is in the interests of the proposer to cloak them in neutral language. In addition, it is possible that rules that may have profound partisan consequences down the line may not

actually have been originally intended for this purpose. One method of overcoming the problems inherent in interpreting rules is to examine the debates that surrounded their introduction. Were they perceived to be only technical by the key actors involved? The debates of the European Parliament have not been subject to significant analyses and they are an unmined treasure trove for those interested in the historical evolution of the institution.

The debates on the general revision of the Rules of Procedure in the first directly elected Parliament provide an illustrative example of the potential for this alternative and complementary approach to the vexing question of agenda powers. Much of the debate hinged on the rights of big groups versus small groups, but it was also asserted that the proposed revisions aimed to quell dissent within the large political groups themselves. Mario Capanna, speaking on behalf of the Communists declared that,

This idiotic policy with regard to the Rules of Procedure has a very specific object in view, namely to reduce the areas of dissent within Parliament. And I mean dissent not only among the minority groups but also within the majority groups whether of the right, centre-right or even, occasionally, the left.<sup>3</sup>

Else Hammerick, of the small left-wing Rainbow coalition (ARC), reiterated this point when she complained about the new proposal to limit explanations of the vote. She argued that not only would this proposal serve to strengthen the large political groups vis-à-vis the small ones but it would also serve to weaken dissenting party members within the large parties.

In future only one representative of each group would be allowed an explanation of vote before voting took place. Only one from each group, that would substantially strengthen the position of the supranational political groups with their pecking orders and hierarchies, and correspondingly weaken those who do not share the group's majority views and weaken national minorities within them. In the past explanations of vote gave these minorities a chance to speak.<sup>4</sup>

The manner and means by which elected representatives attempt to get their own preferences aired vary from legislature to legislature, but they broadly fall into two categories: the right to table questions and the right to place amendments on the parliamentary agenda. Major revisions of the rules undertaken since 1979 have effectively removed many of these privileges from individual members. For instance, the right to table amendments in Parliament, the right to refer a report back to committee, the right to call for an adjournment of debate and the right to call for a debate on a matter of urgency have all been revoked from individual MEPs. Such rights now rest with political groups or 40 members acting in concert. With the passage of these revisions, individual members have been emasculated. Speaking time

has also been drastically reduced over the years. In April 1979 there was no limitation, for example, on the length of time a member could devote to an 'explanation of the vote'; by 2007 this right had been severely circumscribed such that a member 'may give an oral explanation on the final vote for not longer than one minute' (European Parliament, 2007: 163). Rule 142 further dictates that 'No Member may speak for more than one minute on any of the following: the minutes, procedural motions, amendments to the final draft agenda or to the agenda'. These policies not only stifle independent members but also serve to stifle dissent within the larger groups.

The EP's limits on individual rights are among the most restrictive in Europe. Individual legislators do not possess significant speaking rights or adjournment rights in the EP, and what rights they did have, have been severely circumscribed over the course of the past 25 years. Over the years, political groups have become the gatekeepers of legislative amendments and of most interruptive and procedural motions in the EP, and even a preliminary analysis of the debates on this matter suggest that the two largest political groups consciously undertook these rule changes. Before we dismiss the role of agenda-setting powers in creating political group cohesion we should examine rule evolution in this institution in greater detail.

### **A dynamic party system**

Parties form, fail, merge and divide on a staggering basis in the EP. Simply keeping track of which MEPs are in which political groups and which national parties are affiliated with which of the supranational groups is no mean feat. It is generally the case that in the literature on political parties far too little attention is paid 'to the evolution of party systems between elections' (Laver and Benoit, 2003). The authors of this book argue that there are 'six main political "families" which have remained relatively consistent across all six elected parliaments' (Hix et al., 2007: 23) and they identify these as social democrat, centre-right, liberal, radical left, green and anti-European. This is not a controversial claim, but the use of six party 'families' as the basic unit of analysis in parts of the book may not capture the full extent of dynamism that exists in the EP. This dynamism in party group formation is also of interest to the very question of cohesion. Party families do not whip members into line and this choice of analytical unit may depress the cohesion scores for the smaller political groups, which appear at times to have been merged by the authors into one family. As the authors openly acknowledge, the radical left comprised several different political groups until well into the third Parliament. Even excluding independents, there were 10 separate

political groups in the EP for most of the third legislative session, not six. The number of political groups in the EP varies over time and only the three main political groups can be thought of as party families in the traditional sense for most of the history of the directly elected parliament.

As a general explanatory variable, party family has shortcomings when it comes to explaining the dynamic nature of political groups in the EP. Although capturing the broad spirit of the ideological basis on which party groupings originally formed, the party family explanation inadequately explains national party affiliation with EP party groups. First, party family is an essentially static characterization, based on long-standing, 'essential and indelible' (Klingemann et al., 1994: 24) issue associations and positions, whereas national parties frequently and regularly switch EP party groups. Second, many national parties do not belong to clearly definable party families, either because their organizational basis does not correspond to the classic cleavages or because they are formed primarily around new (single) issues such as Europe or immigration. This situation characterizes many of the parties from the eight post-communist member states.

A general problem with the concept of party family as an operational variable is that, despite its wide use, the classification of party family remains underspecified. Even after years of research, there exists no golden index of party family affiliations. This problem is exacerbated when one attempts to extend the concept of party family beyond its West European base. For instance, there are large numbers of parties in Eastern Europe that cannot easily be classified in terms of party families because they do not share either an ideological heritage or associational links with their West European counterparts. Even advocates of the party family approach and experts in the politics of Eastern Europe cannot place these political parties definitively into party families. For instance, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004) place many parties such as the Czech Civic Democratic Party, the Slovak Christian Democratic Movement and the Polish Union of Real Politics into both the Liberal and Conservative party family in their study. There is much disagreement on what even constitutes a party family. For example, do agrarian and centre parties form one party family or two party families? Nonetheless, the association between party family and policies towards European integration has been used to conclude that political contestation in the European arena is largely driven by cleavage patterns (Marks and Wilson, 2000; Marks et al., 2002).

The dynamics and evolution of the party system within the EP offer a fruitful avenue of research for party scholars. In terms of party cohesion, this dynamism offers interesting possibilities. Are national parties or MEPs who fail to toe the political group line forced to leave the party, or do they voluntarily jump ship? Do legislators alter their voting behaviour as a consequence

of changing party affiliation? If they fail to do so, we may have evidence of partyless voting behaviour and perhaps have more confidence in the use of NOMINATE scores as ideological proxies. If, however, we witness change this may be further evidence of party discipline. If legislators switch from a more to a less disciplined party (or vice versa) and thus become subject to shifting degrees of party instruction across roll calls, the matter becomes even more complex (Rosenthal and Voeten, 2004). In future work one could address these issues by dividing up the voting records of party-switchers and estimating separate ideal points for the two parties they have affiliated with in the course of a single legislative session.

## Conclusion

These are exciting times for EP scholars. Better data and analytical tools have become available in recent years that allow for much more systematic analysis of legislative behaviour. In *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Hix, Noury and Roland ask many fundamental questions about the nature of legislative organization in the European Parliament and provide many answers. Perhaps even more importantly, this book challenges and motivates a whole host of new puzzles, in the finest traditions of scientific research, and deserves a very wide readership.

On a final note, this book has fulfilled its mission to connect research on the European Parliament to the general study of legislative behaviour and institutions in political science. The true promise and potential of EU scholarship is that it provides a testing ground for extant theories of legislative behaviour, reinforcing what we already know and offering the possibility of falsification and, most importantly, the opportunity to broaden the trends in legislative studies in general. It is remarkable that our understanding of legislative politics is largely dictated by the experience of the US House of Representatives. The similarities with the EP make for relatively easy comparison, but it is perhaps the differences, such as the lack of an electoral connection, that will be most instructive. How such differences influence actors' incentive structures and motivations and, as a consequence, their behaviour and decision outcomes may fundamentally affect our very understanding of legislative politics.

## Notes

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This Forum article was commissioned by Gerald Schneider in the Autumn of 2006 and all editorial work was undertaken by Matthew Gabel.

- 1 Though not normally provided by the standard NOMINATE package, confidence intervals can be produced for NOMINATE scores; see Lewis and Poole (2004).
- 2 For similar work on the Council of Ministers, see Carrubba and Volden (2001). For an account of procedural choice and rule evolution across the European Union as a whole, see Jupille (2004).
- 3 *Debates of the European Parliament*, 8 July 1980.
- 4 *Debates of the European Parliament*, 26 March 1981.

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